

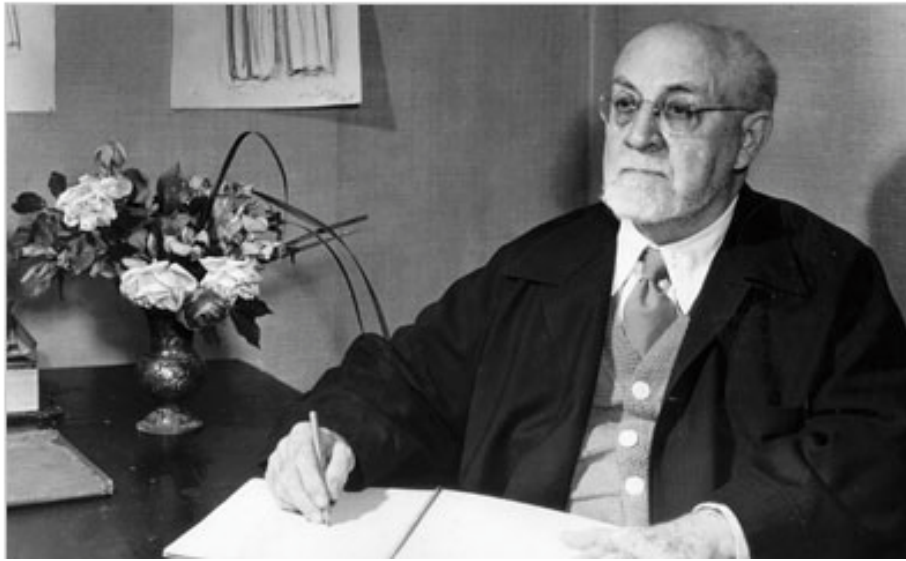
# "Beasts of the Sea" Lesson: Henri Matisse Created by Art in Action



*Beasts of the Sea*, Henri Matisse, 1950

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# Artist Background: Henri Matisse



Henri Matisse  
(1869-1954)

- Henri Matisse was born in France in 1869. At 20, Matisse was planning to become a lawyer. His studies were interrupted by an attack of appendicitis. During his long convalescence, Matisse began to paint and was encouraged to study art instead.
- Matisse's painting style changed many times during his life. Matisse was an Impressionist, an Expressionist, and an Abstractionist. However, Matisse is most closely associated with Fauvism. The Fauve artists used raw, bright, hot colors and vigorous brushwork to express their feelings. This style got its name when one shocked critic used the word "fauve", which means wild beast in French, to describe their paintings. Van Gogh and Gauguin influenced Matisse by the way they used bright colors and simple shapes.
- Matisse wanted to express himself with color and shape rather than with realistic shading and perspective. He liked to reduce complex subjects to their simplest elements using line and shape.
- By 1918, Matisse had a worldwide reputation, and besides his paintings and line drawings, he was commissioned to do book illustrations, ballet sets, and murals. One of his most famous paintings, "La Danse", shows abstract figures moving in graceful rhythm. Matisse also made all the decorations, including the furniture and the stained glass windows, for a church in France.

- In the final years of his life, Matisse experimented with collage because he could no longer hold a brush or stand at his easel. During this time, Matisse created some of his most vibrant and expressive work simply using brightly colored cut paper pasted on contrasting backgrounds.

## Art Discussion: Beasts of the Sea



*Beasts of the Sea*, Henri Matisse, 1950

### **What beasts of the sea can you find in this picture?**

Small spider-like creatures crawl through the spaces, and broad, leaf-like shapes float across the blocks of color. The blue wavy lines may represent the sea, and yellow the bright sky, and the black spaces the depths of the ocean. Matisse had visited the South Seas, and his memories of Tahiti were based on vivid colors, gentle motion, and surprises hiding under every rock.

### **How did Matisse make this still life seem alive?**

Curving lines and bright, contrasting colors create a feeling of movement. The thin blue line disappears off one panel then reappears on the other.

### **Where did Matisse place contrasting colors next to each other?**

Light yellow next to black or blue creates a strong contrast of light and dark, warm and cool colors.

**How does Matisse show depth?**

Since the Renaissance, “good” painters used modeling, or highlights and shadows to show three dimensions, or depth. Matisse challenged that. He preferred to use color and pattern to make his composition. For most of his life, he painted his designs, planning the composition with cutout shapes, and then using paint for the final work. But late in life when poor health kept him confined to a bed, he used colored paper for the final composition.

**What is the main color in *Beasts of the Sea*?**

Yellow is the color of the background. Greens and blues, bright yellows and pinks, and dark purples, black and white contrast with each other. How many tints and shades of green can you find? Both green and yellow are repeated seven times.

**Where does Matisse use texture?**

The patterns are flat two-dimensional designs, like cutouts. Most of the shapes are one solid color, but some have been painted to show texture.

**How many different shapes can you find?**

Matisse used two different types of shapes: geometric and organic. Geometric shapes are simple symmetrical shapes such as circles, triangles, ovals, and squares. Where did Matisse use geometric shapes in this painting? Which shapes have straight lines? Organic shapes are irregular (non-symmetrical) and curving. Find organic shapes. Are the shapes balanced?

**Where do shapes create patterns?**

Patterns are made from repeated shapes. The repetition of the background rectangles creates the pattern that unifies the whole composition. The curling lines in different colors are another repeated pattern. The spiny animals, the branching coral, and the spirals are patterns that are repeated and echoed. Matisse loved the richness of the patterns. He was not trying to paint a realistic scene. By repeating shapes and colors, Matisse adds interest while still connecting all the parts to the whole.

# Art Project: Sea Life Collage (60 mins)

## Materials:

- 9x24 white paper for base
- 6x9 paper: black, blue, yellow, pink, chartreuse, magenta, green, turquoise
- pencils
- glue
- scissors



## Activity instructions (15 mins):

1. Design a background color composition using 5 pieces of colored paper to build an undersea collage in Matisse's style. Experiment with color combinations, and move the blocks of paper around to arrange contrasting colors, warm colors, or cool colors together to build a background.
2. Cut two blocks into two pieces and separate them. Cut them at an angle or into unequal pieces. Arrange a balanced background.
3. Cut a new color block apart with a curving line and spread the sections to create a negative line. Choose a different color. Lay the pieces over another block of paper to let a different texture or color show through. Objects can overlap the colored background.
4. Cut another color block apart with a jagged line, and spread the sections apart. Lay them over another block or against the white background. Cut two or three jagged lines, and spread the sections evenly.
5. Glue the background in place when you are satisfied with the balance of shapes and colors. Don't overlap more than two colors



or shapes in the background.

6. Cut out a shape for the foreground, and use both the cutout piece and the piece it was cut out from to show positive and negative shapes. Use the positive, or cutout shape in one part of the collage, and the negative, or background shape, in a different place.



7. Cut out two smaller shapes to layer on the colored blocks. Draw a squiggle or wide line or seaweed shape on a folded paper. Cut two at once. Arrange them near each other or in different parts of the collage, or cut the same shape from two colors.

8. Draw and cut out one or two shapes of underwater creatures such as shells, fish, starfish, spirals, or jellyfish. Use different colors to mix and match.



9. Continue to cut and arrange shapes to fill the paper, but never overlap more than three layers. Glue all pieces in place by lifting corners and putting a dab of glue on each part of each piece.

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